

Dialogue sermon preached by Rev. JF Hudson and Liz Williams at Pilgrim Church  
12/16/07: Scripture—Luke 1:26-38

“And They Pondered These Things In Their Hearts”

(In ancient Jewish circles a new Biblical interpretation tool emerged around the time of Jesus’ birth. It was called midrash, midrash. Its method was simple and bold—to take the bare bones of a Biblical story—and then imagine, fill in "in between the" lines details, thoughts, ideas, notions. To ask, “Well, what if ?” and then run with it. Has anyone here read the best-selling book “the Red Tent” by Anita Diamanti? That’s midrash. Seen or read “Wicked” by Gregory Macguire—that’s midrash of Frank Baum’s Wizard of Oz book series. So today Liz and I will midrash the stories of Jesus’ birth—imagine ourselves as Joseph and Mary and then ponder what they pondered in their hearts when they found out Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit and would birth a Messiah. What did they think? So—imagine that question with us today.)

My name is Joseph, the son of Heli, and my family is descended from the house of King David though these days—with Rome ruling the land through corrupt King Herod--we are far removed from that royal lineage. Like my father I am a carpenter: from stone and wood I build sturdy houses. Most of us live simple, small lives as farmers, traders, potters. We may travel to Jerusalem for major religious feasts once or twice a year, but our lives are about the village and family and faith. Until recently I had simple hopes—to marry a woman, to have children, to carry on my family’s name, to be a craftsman, and to be a good Jew. So—to say my world was shaken to the core by the news of my fiancée Mary’s pregnancy—well, that caused about the greatest heartache and shock I’ve ever felt. It made no sense—I mean Mary came from a good family—I watched her grow up and knew from a young age I wanted her as my wife. And so when she came to me and told me that she was with child, well I was confused. I was angry. I was hurt. We had not had relations with one another—engaged couples don’t do that—it is not right and such behavior is against the code of Deuteronomy, it breaks the law.

So--I didn’t know what to do. I did know if her pregnancy became public knowledge, we both would be disgraced, laughed at, shamed by our neighbors and friends. That shocking news would mean the end of life as we knew it and not just for us but for both of our families too. So—even though I would have been within my legal rights to walk away from the engagement—return the dowry—publicly demand that Mary be shunned by the religious elders, I didn’t do that, could not. I loved her. Didn’t want to hurt her. So—I discreetly went to Mary’s parents and said—we’ll quietly end the engagement. I’ll find another wife—and I guess Mary can just stay at home and have the baby and if I am asked I will never, ever speak badly of her. But pregnant, unmarried—what happened? Why did she do this? Mary—what happened? How did you feel when you knew you were pregnant?

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Some ask me now—do I fear the responsibility of raising this “special” child?  
Well, as I said I was ready to leave Mary but then one night soon after I told Mary it was over, as I slept—tossed and turned in worry about this awful situation, I heard a voice, in

my head, in my heart—from God, I now understand—and this messenger told me--“to not be afraid to take Mary as my wife, that Jesus is by the Holy Spirit, that he will save our people from their sins.” At first I thought—am I mad? Crazy like those zealous religious prophets that stand on the Temple steps and wildly preach? And I hadn’t drunk wine the night before either so it wasn’t that.

No: the voice was real. And my heart—it changed. It grew stronger and suddenly I knew that I had to go back to Mary because now the both of us had a very special God-given call: to love and care for this new baby, regardless of where it came from. So sure—I’m afraid. This adopted son of my mine Jesus is my son and yet he is not; he will be of me, will learn how to wield a hammer and work wood but so too, Jesus, I have this sense his work will be about so much more than the ordinary tasks of life. So: as long as he is mine I will be his father. I will love him with all my heart. I will raise with him with other brothers and sisters and teach him of God and faith and hope that he will do us and his family proud. So I guess I am afraid as any new parent and I am afraid for him—for what lies ahead. I wonder if the work God is planning for my little boy might somehow threaten Rome or worse, King Herod. And you Mary—are you afraid for our son, for Jesus and this responsibility?

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This pregnancy: has it changed the hopes dreams that I have for my life? Well--as a new Dad birth changes everything. The focus of my life has to switch from me to thee, from myself to this little crying and squirming bundle that is so weak and helpless and dependent on Mary and I for everything—food, shelter, protection. I remember the night he was born, such a strange and beautiful evening, all of us huddled together in that chilly cave, Bethlehem so darn crowded because of the census, that we could not even find a decent room for Mary to give birth within. When you see your child emerge, all pink and wrinkled and shivering, the steam rising off of him because it was so darn cold—it does change everything. But I get the feeling sometimes that Mary, much better than I, she understands just what God is asking Jesus to do with his life. She better knows the great responsibility we both bear in raising him to manhood. Just having carried him in her body for nine months—a Mom just knows in her bones about a baby. So if anything has changed it is this: I will do everything within me to protect him from anything or anyone who seeks to keep Jesus from his mission, whatever that is. I’ll do my best to be a good man so he will be a good man too. That’s what a Dad is supposed to do. And you Mary—have your hope and dreams been changed by Jesus’ birth?